

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Reclamation projects provide many recreational opportunities, including fishing, boating, rafting, and camping. In total, more than 80 million people visit Reclamation lands each year.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the majority of customers responding to the Customer Satisfaction Survey commented favorably on Reclamation's customer service. They said Reclamation was doing a good to excellent job in most aspects of providing customer service. Customers generally found Reclamation staff to be courteous, helpful, and knowledgeable. Customers specifically named 51 individuals as outstanding performers, and only three individuals were named for poor performance. Numerous comments were also received regarding outstanding performance from specific Reclamation offices and groups of staff (e.g., engineers, secretaries).

Customers expressed significant interest in learning about and becoming more involved in Reclamation programs and initiatives. More than half of the respondents were interested in receiving information in nine separate program areas, and more than 70% were interested in water and environmental programs and new initiatives. Nearly half of the customers contacted Reclamation at least monthly, and 65% contacted Reclamation at least quarterly. Customers responding to the open-ended questions urged Reclamation to take a leadership role in water management and to publicize its responsibilities and initiatives in its mission areas. Many customers also requested more personal contact with the agency.

On the whole, customers rated Reclamation's job performance as fair to good in 14 program areas. Customers rated Reclamation's performance highest in its more traditional mission objectives: dam safety, hydropower generation, public safety, water delivery, and facilities operation and maintenance. Customers rated Reclamation's performance lower, although still better than fair, in its newer mission responsibilities, including environmental and archeological resource management, recreation, water conservation, and endangered species restoration.

Seventy percent or more of customers said that Reclamation always or often communicates well with them by providing access to the people they need to contact, providing accurate information, and using plain language. A majority of customers said that Reclamation is easy to do business with because it provides a single point of contact and consistent information. A majority of customers also believed Reclamation valued its relationship with its customers and understood their needs.

Although the overall responses to the Customer Satisfaction Survey indicated favorable impressions of Reclamation's customer service, significant concerns were expressed regarding several areas. One purpose of this survey was to identify areas for improvement and concrete actions Reclamation could take to improve its customer service. Consequently, the survey questions addressed key aspects of Reclamation's performance. For many of the attributes presented in the closed-ended questions, as many as one-quarter to one-third of the respondents rated Reclamation's performance as fair to poor. In certain cases, the numbers were higher. In one area — including customers in decision making (Question 1.3) — 59% of respondents rated Reclamation's performance as only fair to poor.

The open-ended survey questions asked customers to identify specific areas where Reclamation could improve customer service. Questions 1.6, 2.6, and 4.1 all solicited ideas or actions that Reclamation could implement that would, in the respondents' views, improve customer service. Many customers responded positively to these questions and offered suggestions. Approximately 10% of the respondents (95 responses from 82 individuals) were extremely dissatisfied; many of these customers said the organization was "worthless" and should "disband." In all, 944 responses were received to these three sections. While not all of the comments were constructive in terms of identifying corrective actions, many were. And, although each respondent made individual comments, the sum of comments did address certain themes. Many of these themes reinforced the results of the closed-ended questions.

Argonne identified significant issues on the basis of the results of both the closed- and open-ended questions. Section 4.1 identifies the significant issues or findings of the survey, which are grouped into the following broad categories:

- Stakeholder involvement,
- Management of customer information,
- Customer relationships,
- Government bureaucracy,
- Consistency,
- Accessibility of staff,
- Timeliness of responses, and
- Reclamation's changing role.

In addition to analyzing the survey results and identifying significant issues, Argonne was asked to provide recommendations for how Reclamation could address survey findings. The recommendations, which are discussed in section 4.2, are structured around four potential program initiatives, which are:

- Develop and implement a customer management system,
- Establish an outreach program,
- Review business practices, and
- Review stakeholder roles and receive stakeholder input.

These four initiatives address all of the significant issues identified in Section 4.1. Some of the initiatives address more than one issue. Consequently, there is not a one-to-one relationship between issues and initiatives. Table 4.1 summarizes the relationship between them.

Table 4.1 Issues and Recommendations Resulting from the Customer Satisfaction Survey

Issue	Recommendation
Stakeholder involvement	Review stakeholder roles and receive stakeholder input.
Management of customer information	Develop and implement a customer management system.
Customer relationships	Establish an outreach program.
Government bureaucracy	Review business practices.
Consistency	Review business practices.
Accessibility of staff	Review business practices. Develop and implement a customer management system.
Timeliness of responses	Develop and implement a customer management system. Review business practices.
Reclamation's changing role	Establish an outreach program. Review business practices.

4.1 SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

4.1.1 Stakeholder Involvement

OMB narrowly defines customers as groups that directly receive goods and services. Therefore, Reclamation customers include water and power users and recreationists. Environmental groups, members of the public, and other stakeholders, although they have an interest in Reclamation policies, do not directly receive goods and services. Consequently, OMB does not view these groups as customers even though Reclamation defined them as customers in its 1994 Customer Service Plan (USBR 1994).

Although OMB objects to including stakeholders as customers, OMB did not reject the idea of surveying them, perhaps even by using Customer Satisfaction Survey instrument. However, OMB also disapproved of Reclamation's sampling methodology (i.e., the way it proposed to canvas its stakeholders). The lists that Reclamation proposed to use as the basis of its stakeholder population

did not, in OMB's opinion, reflect the breadth of stakeholders under Reclamation's definition. National interest groups encompass a much wider constituency than that reflected in the regional lists Reclamation had obtained for this survey. Therefore, OMB would neither approve including stakeholders in the Customer Satisfaction Survey nor allow surveying them separately by using existing lists of individuals.

In summary, stakeholder opinions were not canvassed in this effort. Because Reclamation views stakeholders as customers, their exclusion of them from the survey process might skew the data in favor of Reclamation's traditional customers and regulatory partners who were included in the survey. Two questions must be answered to determine if the exclusion of stakeholders creates such a bias. First, are stakeholders truly customers? The Executive Branch — OMB, National Performance Review (NPR), and the President (through EO 12862) — does not view stakeholders as customers. It believes that although stakeholders play an important role in governmental planning and have a vested interest in the outcome of governmental decisions, they do not receive direct goods and services and, consequently, play a different role than that of the customers who receive goods and services. If stakeholders are not customers, then the results of this survey do, in fact, accurately reflect the views of *customers*. However, if stakeholders are customers, the second question is, "Would their input have changed the results of the survey?" To answer this question, the survey instrument was analyzed. The analysis was based on reason rather than science, because stakeholders had not been canvassed, so it was impossible to predict exactly how their inclusion might alter survey results.

The continuity of responses among customer groups — as discussed in Chapter 3 and presented in graphical form in Appendices J through M — suggests that it is unlikely that the exclusion of stakeholders resulted in any significant bias for most of the questions. Generally, even though customers received different services and contacted different people within the agency, customers had similar opinions. Even the responses to the open-ended questions, which provided respondents with opportunities to comment on *any* issue of concern to them, revealed common themes among all customers.

For question 1.1, of seven attributes mentioned, answers with regard to two — “is committed to understanding my needs” and “values my relationship as a customer” — might have been altered had stakeholders been included in the survey. Stakeholders have different needs and different relationships with the agency than do traditional customers. In comparing survey results among customer types, recreational and environmental customers rated Reclamation slightly higher than traditional water and power customers. Water customers rated Reclamation notably lower in these two attributes, which is consistent with responses to many of the open-ended responses, which indicated that some of the water customers felt abandoned by Reclamation in favor of environmental interests. These results suggest that the inclusion of stakeholders would have provided slightly higher ratings with regard to these attributes. However, a sizable number of customers rated Reclamation only fair to very poor in these attributes, suggesting the agency would benefit by improving outreach to its traditional customers and its stakeholders (see sections 4.1.3 and 4.2.2).

Questions 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.2, and 2.4 dealt with contacting Reclamation and receiving information from them. It seems reasonable that stakeholders would have less frequent contact with Reclamation and that their contact would be more formal because their scope of interaction with the agency is narrower (i.e., traditional customers are also stakeholders but stakeholders are not traditional customers). If this is true, answers to questions 1.2, 1.3., and 2.2 might have changed slightly to reflect the less frequent and more formal contact: lower ratings for frequency in receiving information from and contacting the agency; in asking for, listening to, considering, and including ideas in decision making; and higher ratings for contacting regional or Commissioner’s offices rather than local area offices.

For question 1.5, the results of the survey indicated that traditional customers and partners were interested in communicating with Reclamation through a variety of media, with the majority of respondents indicating they would like to communicate with Reclamation in all of the ways listed in the survey (e.g., mail, Internet, meetings). While stakeholders might have had different priorities for

communication modes (perhaps more interest in Internet/e-mail communication and public meetings), their input probably would not have changed the overall conclusions based on the answers to this question.

For question 2.2, customers were asked to evaluate Reclamation's staff. Although stakeholders might deal more with managerial staff than other staff types, overall there is no reason to believe that stakeholders would have a view of Reclamation's staff significantly different from that of traditional customers and partners. In the survey results, although the respondents' degree of satisfaction with Reclamation staff varied, there was consistency among the ratings. All customer groups rated Reclamation staff highest in courteousness and lowest in timeliness. Stakeholders would likely have the same impressions.

Section 3 of the survey asked respondents to evaluate Reclamation's performance in 14 program areas and to indicate which program area was most valuable to them. Stakeholder input might have altered the overall ratings of the programs and very likely would have altered the answers to question 3.2 regarding the most valuable service. Generally, customers answered this question on the basis of their affiliation — water customers said water supply was the most valuable area, power customers said hydropower generation was the most valuable. Stakeholders probably would have increased the ratings for environment, endangered species restoration, and cultural and archeological resources as being the most valuable program areas.

Section 4 of the survey gave respondents an opportunity to comment on any issue of concern to them. If included, stakeholders might have identified areas that were not identified by other customers. However, the lack of stakeholder input does not diminish the importance of the comments received from traditional customers and partners.

Overall, stakeholder input is important. Stakeholders might have raised some additional concerns in specific areas. However, it does not appear their participation in this survey would have substantially altered the survey results, and implementing actions in response to survey results would likely benefit stakeholders as well as traditional customers and partners.




4.1.2 Management of Customer Information

Reclamation provided Argonne with lists that were the basis for the customer populations cited in the OMB justification (see section 2.1). Several of the lists were unusable, and the usable lists contained numerous duplications and incomplete addresses. The lists also did not delineate customer interests (e.g., agricultural water users, recreationists).

The utility of the lists was further questioned after the initial survey mailing. Approximately 10% of the surveys sent were “not deliverable as addressed” and could not be forwarded. In addition, 17 people telephoned to correct their names or addresses on the master mailing lists. Another 18 people telephoned to have names removed from the mailing lists because the addressee was retired, deceased, or did not consider himself/herself a customer. The actual number of incorrect addresses and noncustomers was probably much higher and reflected in the survey response rate.

Scattered lists, duplicate names, incomplete and inaccurate addresses, and inclusion of uninterested persons on mailing lists suggest these lists were not actively managed. The consequences of this situation are that (1) Reclamation may be wasting time and resources contacting people who are not interested in providing or receiving information from the agency and that (2) other interested customers may be overlooked.

Customers suggested that managing customer mailing was an important action Reclamation could take to improve customer service.

-  *Consolidate mailings. I get two to five copies of things sometimes. Also outdated names and addresses from 20 years ago on the mailings.*
-  *Every farmer who uses the Bureau of Reclamation water should be on your mailing list on what is going on.*
-  *I received this letter addressed to [wrong name]—with my correct address on it—my name is [name omitted]. Since I've served with the Committee of Nine for many years I thought this was a mistake so I answered the survey. Have I done right? Please advise.*

These comments and similar ones displayed in the appendices were not specifically solicited by the survey questions and highlight the significance of this issue.

4.1.3 Customer Relationships

The customer service revolution in government has changed the way that government views customers (Gore 1995; Clinton and Gore 1997). Customers are now seen as playing an integral part in the design of agency programs and policies. Advocates for customers argue that if government cannot or will not provide the service that customers demand, governmental programs ought to be handed over to the private sector and run as businesses. Even though external laws and regulations still affect the way Reclamation provides goods and services to its customers, there are many opportunities for Reclamation to try to better understand customer needs, respect and solicit customer opinions, and advocate customer positions among other interests. Customers responding to the survey felt that Reclamation could do a better job of building customer relationships through understanding and responding to their specific needs.

Customers are interested in Reclamation and have specific ideas about how to improve Reclamation's policies and programs. One significant way that service could be improved, according to

survey respondents, is through better understanding and response to customer needs — listening to customer concerns, considering customer opinions, adapting agency policies to be more customer friendly, and being more open in building trusting relationships with customers.

Although the majority of customers were pleased with their relationship with Reclamation, more than 30% of respondents thought that Reclamation only sometimes, rarely, or never “values my relationship as a customer,” and more than 40% of respondents felt that Reclamation only sometimes, rarely, or never “is committed to understanding my needs.” Many customers elaborated on these feelings in the open-ended questions. Customers expressed concern that Reclamation did not understand their needs and/or did not care about serving its customers. Water customers in particular seemed to feel that Reclamation no longer advocated their interests in the political arena.

- ✍️ Listen to the needs of the farmers and public districts instead of telling them what is best...*
- ✍️ As we watch Reclamation shift their loyalty away from agriculture and see the changes in Area Office staff we find our distrust growing and continue to try to distance ourselves from them.*
- ✍️ Treat us like we truly are partners in the irrigation business, more like they did years ago. We still have the same needs.*

Respondents suggested more personal contact would help the agency better understand the needs of its constituency. Customers suggested personal meetings with key customers, increased stakeholder involvement, and visitations by Reclamation management to customer organizations.

- ✍️ [Reclamation] should spend personal time with key customers so that a trust level is developed and eliminate surprises.*
- ✍️ Personal contact at our facility!! They need to see how we operate our facility to understand first hand our operation.*

Many respondents ranked Reclamation’s performance low for soliciting and incorporating customer concerns into agency actions. Forty-seven percent of respondents ranked Reclamation as

fair, poor, or very poor in asking for customer ideas; 46%, 52%, and 59% of respondents, respectively, ranked Reclamation as fair, poor, or very poor in listening to, considering, and including customer ideas in decision making. Respondents to the open-ended questions provided additional comments that supported the need for increased customer involvement.

[Reclamation should] continuously work to build and maintain its relationship with me and my organization through regular interaction.

[It would help] just to have more interaction with the Bureau of Reclamation. As it is now I don't receive hardly any.

Some commented that Reclamation needed to be more honest and open in its dealings with customers. Many customers wanted to become more involved in actions that affect their interests and wanted to know how they could interact with Reclamation.

Approach all issues openly and honestly. It often seems the Bureau of Reclamation has fixed its position before discussions begin...Receiving input seems to be nothing more than providing clients with an opportunity to "blow off steam."

Provide information on how to contact [Reclamation] and what office does what, when, where, and how.

When asked what one improvement Reclamation could make, nearly one-quarter (23%) of customers responding to question 1.6 said Reclamation could do a better job of listening to and considering the opinions of others, including Indian nations and local governmental entities.

I am not interested in being placated. I am interested in getting an honest, straight, and prompt answer or information on [crucial points].

Listen to what I say.

4.1.4 Government Bureaucracy

For the most part, Reclamation's customers gave high marks to individual employees but were frustrated by the bureaucratic systems that seems to inhibit employees from doing their jobs. About 90% of respondents said that Reclamation staff members were always or often courteous/respectful. However, nearly one-quarter of respondents said that staff were only sometimes, rarely, or never helpful or knowledgeable. These feelings might be explained by the fact that customers are frustrated by the bureaucracy. Customers frequently commented that Reclamation staff were overworked and had too much on their plates or were engrossed in paperwork or bureaucracy.

- ✍ Stress level has increased for conscientious employees due to great amounts of work and staff reduction. Also more paperwork (OSHA etc.) than meaningful work (operations and maintenance [of] facilities).*
- ✍ For the most part, they are nice, courteous and knowledgeable. They are often at times frustrating to deal with because no one can seem to make a decision. Their policy positions change as often as you talk to them. Good people, but poor organization of bureaucracy.*

A substantial number of respondents commented about the need for Reclamation to reduce its bureaucracy.

- ✍ Less bureaucratic and more customer service oriented (take on more of a private sector approach to customer service).*
- ✍ Pretend they are private business dependent on customer service for their livelihood!*
- ✍ Not to act like they work for a bureaucracy but a smaller service company that needs my business.*

These comments were typical of those received in government reinvention exercises and probably reflect a broad trend demanding a smaller, more efficient government (e.g., Gore 1995; Clinton and Gore 1997). Overall, survey comments regarding bureaucracy fell into two main categories: flexibility and accessibility.

Customers responding to the survey noted that Reclamation is sometimes entrenched in its practices. They requested that Reclamation be more flexible in its dealings with them and adopt more businesslike practices.

- ✍ The Bureau of Reclamation provides a myriad of services and must be flexible enough to function more as the private sector on the power side and more as a bureaucracy in its dam safety and environmental rules. Reclamation needs to be flexible in its approach to the way it conducts business depending on which service(s) its it providing. Adapt to the environment in which it is operating.*
- ✍ Cut the procedures and paperwork, get to the point, and "level" with us as to your intentions.*
- ✍ Perhaps a bit more flexibility and simplification of the pre-season paperwork [would improve customer service].*
- ✍ [Reclamation could improve service through] addressing of potential problems in meeting guideline requirements. Some of the guidelines are quite old and don't seem to make much sense.*

Along with the theme of adapting to the current environment, other respondents said Reclamation needed to be more reasonable in its documentation requirements. A number of these comments dealt specifically with acreage reporting for the Reclamation Reform Act. Others, like the following, were more general in nature.

- ✍ Be reasonable in requiring certain documents. (For example, don't require Public Involvement Plans if a program already involves a public process.)*
- ✍ Reduce bureaucracy in decision making. Less forms more construction.*

The survey also asked customers to rate Reclamation's use of plain language, which is an important goal of government reinvention. Thirty percent of customers said that Reclamation only sometimes, rarely, or never uses plain language in customer dealings. Open-ended responses provided

additional insight into this question. Some commented that paperwork requirements were difficult to understand. Cost accounting was a specific area where customers recommended improvement.

- ✍ [Reclamation needs] to have understandable cost tracking and cost accountability on projects.*
- ✍ Need to be able to explain budget information in terms that regular people can understand.*
- ✍ Relate information to the customer in plain English realizing we aren't all engineering experts.*
- ✍ Use plain non-legalese language in reporting instructions, forms, etc.*

4.1.5 Consistency

Respondents were concerned that Reclamation staff members did not always provide consistent information or consistently issue or implement Reclamation policies. More than 30% of respondents said that Reclamation sometimes, rarely, or never provides consistent information.

- ✍ Make sure the left hand knows what the right hand is doing!*
- ✍ Speak with one voice — often get different answers to policy questions from staff at various levels within the agency.*

In recommending actions that Reclamation could take to improve customer service, 25 respondents said Reclamation should make its policies and practices more consistent. Thirty-five respondents to the open-ended question on Reclamation staff (question 2.5) said that Reclamation should ensure greater consistency among staff when dealing with customers.

- ✍ [Have a] consistent message and policy interpretation from regional office down to area offices and individual employees.*

4.1.6 Accessibility of Staff

Another area where respondents expressed concern was accessing appropriate staff. This concern manifested both in accessing staff generally and in dealing with a single point of contact. Twenty-five percent of respondents said that Reclamation staff was only sometimes, rarely, or never accessible. In the narrative responses, customers elaborated on staff inaccessibility to include a number of areas: it is hard to contact staff by phone; staff members are overworked or too busy to respond in a timely fashion; the customer's primary contact was unavailable and no backup exists; or it is hard to reach decision makers.



- Provide transfer phone lines to point of contact when people are away. Field people are busy on projects much of the time. They are responsive when they are in but need a way to contact someone who can get to them when they are away.*
- Have a representative available to assist on water matters, land descriptions, at all times. Most of the time only one person knows the information I need and so often they are not on duty due to flextime, vacation, sick leave, or on a field trip somewhere.*

Along the same line, customers expressed frustrations in locating and contacting staff, especially by telephone.

- Have a real person answer the phones. If the person you called does not answer the phone you have no idea when they will get back with you — 5 minutes, 2 days, 2 weeks?*
- Have people answer their phones; too often I get voice mail and no instruction on how to get a 'live' person.*
- Staff taking initial phone calls at both local and regional offices could have a better understanding of other staff responsibilities — it is often difficult to get the person you need.*





One way customers recommended to improve accessibility was to provide a single point of contact. More than 45% of respondents said that Reclamation only sometimes, rarely, or never

maintains a single point of contact. Forty-four (44) respondents suggested that the one improvement Reclamation should make for customer service would be to designate a single point of contact with decisionmaking authority and/or publish a list of agency customer contacts.

-  *Help me understand WHO in the Bureau of Reclamation can and should I be communicating with.*
-  *Publish a directory of offices and responsible entities so I can contact the appropriate office/person on the first call.*

4.1.7 Timeliness of Responses

Forty percent of respondents said that Reclamation staff members were only sometimes, rarely, or never timely in their responses. Customers responding to the open-ended questions expressed concerns about the timeliness of responses by staff (some outlined specific frustrations) and timeliness in taking actions or completing projects (again, some illustrating specific examples).

-  *Move more quickly on requests for approvals. The Bureau of Reclamation ways (red tape) are too slow.*
-  *Speed response to customer requests. Even things that EVERYONE agrees to can take years to accomplish.*
-  *Follow up on agreements etc. in a timely manner and keep me informed of the progress of requests that are taking time.*
-  *Ensure that voice mail messages from phone calls are returned in a reasonable period of time.*




4.1.8 Reclamation's Changing Role

Customers raised several issues not specifically addressed in the survey. Although the percentage of customers making these responses was relatively low (less than 15%), the fact that 100 or more respondents felt compelled to write additional thoughts on these topics warrants them being


highlighted here. These comments reflect thoughts on Reclamation's role with regard to changes in its mission and changes in the federal government generally. Specific areas of concern include:

- Reclamation's new mission,
- Decisionmaking authority at the local level,
- Honoring of agreements and contracts,
- Facility transfers, and
- Visibility and leadership of Reclamation in Western and national water policies.

A significant number of customers commented on Reclamation's new mission and expressed concerns that it represents an abandonment of the agency's historic responsibilities and, consequently, its historic customer constituency.

-  *What is the current purpose of the Bureau of Reclamation? Is this purpose one that will help achieve a healthy U.S. citizenry into the future? What part of this purpose can be best/only achieved by Reclamation? Focus on this instead of trying to go 15 directions at once.*
-  *The goals, objectives, and mission of the Bureau of Reclamation are not known well in this community.*
-  *There is a great deal of confusion as to the Bureau of Reclamation's mission.*

In addition, customers felt that local staff — who were especially helpful, knowledgeable, and dedicated — were not given latitude to make decisions affecting customers. Customers also felt that when decisions were made by local staff, the decisions were overturned at higher levels of the organization as a result of politics, regulations, or red tape.

-  *Empower area and field office staff with authority to make timely and the right decision.*

- ✍ *Empower someone at the area/project office level to make decisions consistent with the Bureau of Reclamation's mission and have them accountable for their actions.*
- ✍ *Delegate greater authority/responsibility to Area Office level.*
- ✍ *Have authority to make decisions at Area Office. The Bureau of Reclamation is no longer a working Department with Irrigation Districts, they have become an obstruction.*

Other customers wanted more information on Reclamation's ongoing activities, particularly with regard to its programming and planning. Customers wanted Reclamation to be more active in providing information to its constituency and lobbying on behalf of its constituency against other political interests. Some respondents even called for disbanding the agency or stated that if Reclamation did not adapt its business practices, customers would find other alternatives for their products and services.

- ✍ *Unless the Bureau of Reclamation starts taking care of its constituency (water and power interests) and paying attention to their issues and problems (instead of creating them), the agency will eventually have no constituency and will not survive much beyond the turn of the century. Most water/power users have already figured out how to do business without the Bureau of Reclamation.*

4.2 POTENTIAL RESPONSES BY RECLAMATION

The Customer Satisfaction Survey has provided significant and meaningful information on how customers currently perceive Reclamation's efforts at customer service. The survey has shown that most customers believe the agency is doing a good to excellent job in conducting its day-to-day business activities: its staff members are accessible, helpful, knowledgeable, and courteous in their dealings with them; its programs are of significant value to them; and most customers are interested in what the agency is doing and how they can remain involved in decisions about Reclamation's projects and programs.

The survey also revealed that a significant number of customers believed there is room for improvement in Reclamation's conduct of its business. Occasionally, as many as 45% of the customers responded that Reclamation's performance in certain areas, was merely fair to poor, which indicates that the agency has opportunities to take definitive actions and implement significant improvements. More frequently, the level of dissatisfaction was limited to approximately 25% to 35% of the respondents. And, only 10% of the respondents were extremely dissatisfied.

Responses to survey questions, particularly open-ended questions, provide significant insight into customers' concerns and what actions Reclamation could take to improve their customer service. To identify Reclamation's potential responses to these concerns, Argonne analyzed the customer responses and grouped them into several different categories or themes. These themes were identified as significant issues and were elaborated on in Section 4.1. In all, there were eight significant categories or issues.

Argonne identified ways in which Reclamation could address these significant issues and presented a number of recommendations that Reclamation could adopt to improve customer service. These recommendations were the result of analyzing the data appropriate to the entire agency. Consequently, Reclamation may need to adapt these recommendations if they are to be applied to the regional or area levels. The main recommendations for improved customer service fell under the following program initiatives (each of which has multiple recommendations):

- Develop and implement a customer management system,
- Establish an outreach program,
- Review business practices, and
- Determine the role of stakeholders in the customer service arena.

These proposed initiatives are described in greater detail in the remaining portion of this section. They were developed on the basis of Argonne's interpretation of survey data and do not represent any discussions held with Reclamation or reflect any activities currently underway within the agency.

4.2.1 Develop and Implement a Customer Management System

Throughout the survey process (starting with the design of the survey instrument and continuing through the customer identification process), it became apparent that Reclamation's customer service process was not a sophisticated system that integrates customer service components into a cohesive program. This situation first became evident when the survey recipients were being identified. Reclamation's customers were identified on lists maintained at either the area or regional offices. The lists were out-of-date, had very little information profiling customers, and were not readily accessible to all parts of the organization.

Reclamation should immediately develop a customer management system that will allow it to better understand who its customers are, what their interests are, and how to better integrate them into agency decision making.

The customer management system must integrate the major components of customer service. It should (1) incorporate a clear and effective policy on customer service that identifies expectations and minimum standards of performance, (2) enable Reclamation to understand who its customers are and (3) what they need, (4) ensure that its staff understands the principles of customer service, (5) measure staff performance, (6) ensure that its customers are given the information necessary to understand what the agency is and what it provides, and (7) ensure that customer needs are seriously considered when it makes decisions.

4.2.1.1 Incorporate a Customer Service Policy

In September 1994, Reclamation published its principles of customer service and expectations for its staff in conducting customer service. These principles represent Reclamation's current policy on customer service. At approximately the same time, the agency underwent a major reorganization in which its mission was significantly redefined and much of the decision making and customer interaction was reassigned to regional or area offices. It was not clear during the survey process if the overall policy and principles of customer service were well understood or if implementation could be measured and documented. In fact, there appeared to be a disconnection between the mandates of the policy and actual practice under this new organization.

Argonne believes Reclamation should reassess its customer service policy to see if it is still appropriate, given the new agency mission and organization. The policy should identify meaningful actions that the agency will take to ensure customer service and methods it will use to measure performance. Given the agency's current organization, it seems mandatory that the field offices (areas and regions) be intimately involved in assessing and, if necessary, redeveloping this policy.

4.2.1.2 Understand Your Customers

The heart of the customer management system should be a database defining Reclamation's customers by both interests and representation. Appropriate fields would be identified and catalogued that would allow Reclamation to target specific customers on the basis of their specific interests or concerns and review them with regard to specific agency initiatives. After designing the database, Reclamation should canvas its customers with a brief questionnaire asking for information required by the fields in the database. After completion, the database should be available to all organizational components in the agency on a read-only basis. The database should be able to be managed both centrally and locally to balance the needs for centralized information and easy maintenance. Specific procedures for managing the database would need to be established.

4.2.1.3 Know Your Customers' Needs

Successful business transactions require that in addition to knowing who your customers are, you have a detailed understanding of their needs and how you can meet them within the operating constraints mandated by policy, regulations, and/or law. Reclamation's customers indicated a desire to interact more with the agency, share information on programs, and be involved in decisions that affect the quality and timeliness of Reclamation's services and products.

Simply put, understanding what customers' needs are is best accomplished by asking them. Greater interaction with the customer on issues of mutual concern can be accomplished in several ways. Face-to-face meetings on specific project issues, participation in customer meetings addressing overall Reclamation program issues, and participation in professional or private sector meetings are a few examples. Section 4.2.2 of this report on a Reclamationwide outreach program expands the discussion on interacting with customers.

4.2.1.4 Ensure Your Staff Understands the Principles of Customer Service

Reclamation can be proud of the job its employees are currently doing in addressing customer needs. In responding to open-ended questions, customers went out of their way to compliment the actions and practices of more than 50 Reclamation employees. Receiving that many compliments is a strong indicator that relations with customers, at a staff level, are good.

However, other comments indicated a need for Reclamation to reinforce the importance of customer service within its business activities. In particular, customers were concerned about responses to telephone inquiries: either not getting them in a timely manner or not getting them at all. Customers were also concerned that Reclamation staff did not seem to understand customer needs, were not responsive to suggestions, and did not consider customer input when making decisions.

To be successful in customer service, an agency's staff must be familiar with its service principles and skilled in applying them to day-to-day interactions with customers. To determine a staff's familiarity, a number of techniques can be employed, including workshops, focus groups, and surveys. Reclamation should consider conducting a survey of employees that would determine their basic understanding of customer service. The survey could be given to all employees or a more select group of those that interact with customers on a regular basis. Such a survey would better equip Reclamation to identify what staff members would need training and what type they would need. Reclamation could then design a training module for certain classes of employees that would become part of a basic training requirement for maintaining proficiency in customer service.

4.2.1.5 Measure Performance

A fundamental question in customer service is, "How do you know when you are successful?" This question is particularly important when a government agency is providing the service. Often the customer has few, if any, alternatives for receiving that service and can seek relief only politically through elected representatives. Agencies are also limited because they provide a limited scope of services to an established customer base that is unlikely to expand. It is clearly in an agency's interest to provide a high level of customer service in order to maintain a satisfied constituency. Ways of determining customer satisfaction include personal contact, a broader approach such as this survey, and an assessment and comparison of the agency's customer service program with those perceived to be the best in the business. This process of comparison is commonly known as benchmarking.

Reclamation should consider beginning a benchmarking process for its customer service program. Performance measures could be identified during the reassessment process of the 1994 Customer Service Plan. These performance measures could be compared with those of other practitioners thought to be superior, and areas of improvement could be identified. Benchmarking is establishing itself as a powerful management tool for identifying areas of potential improvement and increasing productivity.

4.2.1.6 Ensure Customers Understand What You Provide

In a relationship like that between Reclamation and its customers, it is important for customers to understand the products and services the agency provides and what constraints are placed upon the agency in delivering them. In many survey responses, customers said they wanted more information on Reclamation's programs. Particular concerns were expressed about the agency's new mission and how it might impact its traditional roles and responsibilities to develop water resources in the West.

Reclamation could expand its customers' understandings of its new responsibilities and reaffirm their relationship to traditional roles through increased use of its Internet site, greater one-on-one contact with customers, and mailings of descriptive information. An excellent form of communication would be a newsletter, either agencywide or at a regional/area level. Any of these communication instruments would be useful in helping customers know more about Reclamation's diverse programs.

4.2.1.7 Consider Customer Needs When Making Decisions

Perhaps one of the more significant findings of the survey is that Reclamation's customers feel that they need to provide more input into final agency decisions. This belief could stem from perceptions that Reclamation has abandoned its original mission and is turning away from its traditional role of water resource development. Seeking customer input is a very individualized process and gets to the heart of how an agency conducts public business. There are many different issues for which an agency may seek public (including customer) input. Therefore, a particular recommendation on seeking public input cannot be applied to all instances. However, it is incumbent on Reclamation to develop the necessary means to achieve this kind of communication.

In April 1997, Reclamation published a report summarizing its Power Management Laboratory (USBR 1997b). In that document was a suggestion to develop and implement the Hydropower Partnership. The concept was to join in a forum a number of the major customers in the power program to discuss agency initiatives. (Currently, that partnership has not evolved.) Similar forums in other program areas, at both the agency and subagency levels, might be an effective way to provide customer groups a voice in Reclamation's programmatic initiatives. Reclamation should explore this and other mechanisms for bringing customer discussions into its programs.

4.2.2 Establish an Outreach Program

As discussed previously, the survey revealed a need for increased communication between Reclamation and its customers. Therefore, Argonne recommends that Reclamation establish an outreach program to educate its customers about the new agency mission and to inform them about ongoing programs. This program would significantly benefit Reclamation, helping it communicate more effectively with customers. By integrating a number of communication technologies, it would keep customers fully advised about the agency's ongoing activities.

The foundation of the outreach program should be individual contact with customers. In responding to the survey, 95% of the customers indicated they wanted to receive information by mail. Many customers also indicated that they wanted to receive information by telephone (77%), by fax (77%), at personnel meetings (76%), via the Internet (70%), or at public meetings (63%), further indicating that customers wanted more personal interaction with Reclamation. Moreover, some customers wanted access to a list of individuals responsible for various aspects of Reclamation's programs. Although more than 70% of the customers responding to the survey said they knew whom to contact at Reclamation for information, the corollary to this statistic is that something less than 30% — approximately one-third of Reclamation's customers — did not know whom to contact at the agency.

One-on-one meetings and participation in customer annual meetings would greatly reassure Reclamation customers that the agency is not abandoning its traditional role of water management in the western United States. Other media that could contribute to an effective and meaningful outreach program include newsletters and informative publications on the Internet. These tools would be excellent for informing customers and the general public about the many facets of Reclamation's programs.

4.2.3 Review Business Practices

Five of the identified significant issues — government bureaucracy, consistency, accessibility of staff, timeliness of responses, and Reclamation's changing role — could be at least partially addressed through reviewing business practices. Customer concerns included administrative burdens, agency decisionmaking, having single points of contact, timeliness of both completing long-term initiatives and responding to personal interactions, and integrating new mission initiatives with traditional agency responsibilities. Reclamation must address its current business practices and institute continuous process improvements.

The National Performance Review process offers an excellent procedure for reinventing federal government processes. The NPR suggests that agencies approach reinvention efforts with a fresh look and "a clean sheet of paper" to see if there are better ways to do business. It also advocates active participation by an agency's customers.

An excellent opportunity for a reinvention effort, according to survey responders' comments, would be to reassess the reporting and other paperwork requirements of the Reclamation Reform Act. Any analysis of what the framework for such a reinvention effort should be is beyond the scope of this survey. However, this issue was mentioned by a number of customers and must be addressed by Reclamation.

Given the magnitude of responses that mentioned the lack of customer input to decision making, Reclamation must also address how it deals with this issue. Again, the NPR affords an opportunity to better define this customer concern and seek solutions to change this perception. Before a path forward can be identified and designed, more information is needed to determine the extent of this feeling and to assess, in depth, how decisions are currently being made by the agency.

This survey addressed customer perceptions of whether Reclamation staff members were courteous/respectful, knowledgeable, accessible, and helpful. Generally, Reclamation staff members were perceived very favorably in these areas. Two areas of significant concern mentioned by the respondents were the helpfulness of Reclamation staff (about 25% of the respondents indicated sometimes, rarely, or never) and the timeliness of their responses (about 40% of the respondents indicated sometimes, rarely, or never). Customers indicated a need for staff training, a perception of staff arrogance or rudeness, and a belief that the staff focused on the wrong issues or did not care about customer issues. They also thought that Reclamation staff seemed overworked or too busy.

Reclamation should determine the level of staff members' understanding about customer service and decide if training would be beneficial. A survey of the staff, designed to collect information on their perceptions of customer service, would help in the development of a training module.

4.2.4 Review Stakeholder Roles and Receive Stakeholder Input

Due to concerns expressed by OMB, Reclamation's stakeholders were not sampled in this survey. Stakeholders are a large part of Reclamation's constituency. Stakeholders comprised approximately one-third of the entries on Reclamation's customer lists.

Reclamation must resolve the status of its stakeholders, determining whether or not they are to be considered a special group of customers. As a result of Reclamation's new mission, which places greater emphasis on the management of natural resources, Reclamation's stakeholders would be the key element that could provide meaningful input for agency decision making. If stakeholders are to be considered equivalent to customers, it would be helpful for Reclamation to seek their input through a survey or other interactive approaches.